

Globe Life

Beer bongos are so '90s. Pass me my wizard stick

Down a brew. Tape another on top. Drink that one. To attain 'wizard status,' bingeing is the key and health experts are worried

ELIANNA LEV

VANCOUVER — The Canadian Press Published on Monday, Sep. 22, 2008 12:00AM EDT Last updated on Friday, Mar. 13, 2009 10:29AM EDT

Adrinkng game that's making the rounds confers "wizard status" on anyone who consumes enough cans of beer to exceed their height, but a health expert suggests this kind of binge drinking is anything but wise.

The game is played at "wizard stick" parties and the rules are simple. Every beer is taped on top of the one before it. Eventually the beer cans stack up and form a walking stick, which is carried around for the night.

The person whose staff exceeds his height wins, and obtains "wizard status." (When the sticks reach a certain height, they often curl over, resembling a wizard's staff.)

New York-based photographer Patrick O'Dell has documented such parties on his popular photo website, Epicly Later'd.

He said he first saw the parties in a skateboarding video, but has attended several in the last year, including one on a skateboarding tour he was photographing.

"When everyone would gather around the campfire, we'd call it wizard's council," Mr. O'Dell said. "You had to get help to drink your beer by the end. Somebody would hold on to the end and lift it up."

He says a beer company that advertises on an online skateboarding show he hosts became excited by the idea and wanted to somehow use it in promotions. However, laws forbid alcohol companies from promoting excessive drinking.

"They were like, 'Why didn't we think of that? That's the best idea,' until it dawned on them that it's against the rules," he said. "You can't be like 'Binge drink! Become a wizard!'"

A study conducted in Ontario between 1996 and 2005 by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health found the demographic that tends to take part in wizard stick parties - males between 19 and 29 - appears to be the same as the group most likely to drink to excess.

That group had the highest percentage of people surveyed who admitted they drank more than five drinks on one occasion on a weekly or monthly basis.

"It's a particularly vulnerable group and I'm sure the drinking games don't help," said Norman Giesbrecht, a senior scientist at the centre.

In some cases, binge drinking can lead to serious problems such as liver damage, permanent brain damage or death from severe dehydration.

Dr. Giesbrecht said he's concerned about the social consequences of binge drinking, including fighting, drunk driving, sexual violence and unprotected sex.

"All these things are related to heavy drinking and binge drinking," Dr. Giesbrecht said.

In August, a 20-year-old man from Burnaby died after drinking 10 beers and then chugging more than 550-millilitres of whisky on a bet. The RCMP later issued a release warning people about the dangers of binge drinking.

Such a warning doesn't faze Andrew Drury of Vancouver. He's attended and hosted several wizard stick parties, including one for his birthday.

He said the wizardry aspect stems from heavy metal culture, which is closely associated with sorcery - and drinking.

"Most people that are into wizard sticks are probably into dark spirits and heavy metal," he said, adding that it's also popular among skateboarders.

Richard Smith from Simon Fraser University's school of communication said these types of themed parties are about creating an identity, which is generally important to young people even if it means engaging in dangerous activities.

"There's a visual element that's not present in many drinking games," he said. "There's something you can have your picture taken with and post on the Internet. ... Having a big taped-together pile of beer cans is more visual and communicates something immediately.

"You can always swing around and hit people with it. You can stand beside it. You can put it in photos and e-mail it to your friends."

Dr. Giesbrecht said binge drinking is on the rise in Canada, and with all the risks associated with the pastime it's a serious concern.

"I'm not sure what the advantages are of ... a drinking game other than getting intoxicated," he said. "I don't think there's any redeeming value to them at all."

